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CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INFORMANT: Leslie Wong

INTERVIEWER: Quabah Bantu

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Q=Quabah

L=Leslie

Q: Today is April 14, 2016. I am here with Director Leslie Wong. Hello!

L: Hi! Good to be here.

Q: Thank you. Where were you born?

L: Honolulu, Hawaii.

Q: Nice. In what year were you born?

L: Oh wow! You're really (--) [Laughing]

Q: If you mind me asking.

L: No, but you really go into the direct question right there, 1972.

Q: Okay.

L: Yes.

Q: And where are your parents from?

L: My parents, so my dad emigrated from Hong Kong, my mother from Southern China before I was born.

Q: Okay.

L: Yah.

Q: Do you know what year they came to the U.S.?

L: I, you know, it was right before I was born. So I would, I'm going to take a guess of 1971, yah, it wasn't long after that I was born.

Q: Okay. What is one of your favorite childhood memories?

L: My back yard. I was really fortunate actually. So they had immigrated to Hawaii and I grew up on the eastern shore, well on the eastern part of the island and it was a little bit more rural at that time. And so we had a fairly decent size back yard and I was a pretty nature-loving kid. I was the one that was making the mud pies and befriending all of the doves, and the birds, and the peacocks out there. And so I remember just having vats and vats of fish. And you'll laugh because those vats were from, and they used to house all the, what is it, the thousand year old eggs. And so they would import this from various parts of the country. And my parents were in the grocery business, so they were a Chinese grocer. And so they would bring in these vats of supplies, and boxes of supplies, but I remember with these eggs they had to be protected right. So they're fairly fragile and they would come in these ceramic pots that were just absolutely beautiful. And so we had so many of those that my parents were like, "well let's just make that into a fish tank." [Both laugh] So I was the fish, what is it, person and I had like about four vats in the back yard filled with fish.

Q: Wow.

L: And so I was pretty much grew up raising fish and taking care of them. And as they populated I would give them away to the neighbors or (--) [Both laughs] So, so I've always been around animals and fish, and then pretty soon I had ducks.

Q: Oh wow!

L: I mean this was not a big property, it was just a back yard right.

Q: Yah.

L: But I just remember the joy of, you know, being and taking care of animals, and having (--) And I took that for granted, because you know as a kid you're just thinking, "oh this is so natural." And now when I think back, I think wow, that's so unique that we had those little pieces of our culture infused in even like our play area. [Laughs]

Q: Yah.

L: But my parents worked quite a bit. I mean it was not uncommon that they would pull, my dad would pull anywhere from twelve hour shifts. And Chinese New Year I mean they would be working all hours. And my mom was fairly the more consistent one, because with my, with me and my brother of course she couldn't work fulltime. And so she would be with us and work with us on our homework and our meals. But that was my, my life was growing up around the store. So if we weren't in school we were pretty much either at family or working at the store. So I grew up kind of learning the hands on of, oh, how to package all this, how to sell this. [Laughing] So, so that, I mean I just remember the animals and the freedom, even though our backyard (--) Nowadays, I would say oh it was relatively small, but to a kid I mean it was so much to explore. (Q: Yah) So that was, that was really fun.

Q: That's awesome.

L: Yeah!

Q: How was life growing up for you from elementary to high school?

L: Elementary to high school I, it was fine. I think elementary was a little bit of a blur. I went to a parochial Catholic school and that was my parents' decision in terms of assessing again, the quality of schools in the neighborhood and felt like, okay, well we need to put myself and my brother in the Catholic school system. We weren't practicing. We didn't have a practicing religion, but I, we had a, we had a good solid education. We had a good time. I mean it was, you know, you still have the same dynamics of you know, kids being kids, and I think that part of my life just kind of blew by really quickly. I don't remember so much you know, the elementary, elementary.

Middle School was a little bit more formative where you know, you're, you know you make those marks of, okay, which are the really great teachers, and which ones you didn't really like. [Both laugh] I still remember them. But I remember that I was a really shy kid and I was pretty shy around communicating, because I was raised speaking Chinese first, and I was really uncomfortable. Not so much with writing, but you know, in engaging folks in speaking, because I felt like, okay, I don't have a strong feel for the syntax, and the grammar, and the language, and I'm not just that bubbly extroverted person. And so I just really felt drawn to books and I was one of those super introverted kids that folks thought, oh my gosh, she's really depressed or she doesn't you know, yah. I think a lot of teachers when I was growing up were wondering if I was ESL. [Laughs] And I was placed in ESL course at one time because I was so quiet and they had no idea whether or not I could perform in school. And so I was placed in there for a little while and then they figured out, okay, well no, she actually does understand. And I remember there was a funny story where they had pulled my mom in at one point. And they're like, "You know, do you have family issues at home? Are you splitting up, because she just looks so sad and disconnected?" I guess I would go into the classrooms, and while I was synthesizing the content I was looking out the window. [Laughing] So it completely looked like I was not engaged in the classroom, but my grades were fine. And so I think they just figured out, okay, well she's just um socially inept. [Laughing]

So they took me out of ESL and actually tested me and I actually wound up in the honors tract, because I was, like I said, I was pretty engaged, I just wasn't looking at the teacher and looking focused. And so had a really, really great time in the honors tract. And I had a very responsive principal who kind of cued in to some of these things, and saw that I really enjoyed reading and literature, and creative writing. And so I think she was able to, with the honors tract, create a very specialized program for this cohort and we could explore a lot of these areas instead of what I had perceived at the time, just wrote testing. And so we had a lot more opportunity to creatively write essays, and talk about what we were reading. And so I felt really connected at that point. And so I was, you know, in thinking back now, just so fortunate that I had that experience, because as I moved into the high school level I think that was a lot harder had I not had this piece of, okay, I know what I'm really good at, I know what I like and I'm going to pursue this. And then I chose to go to a very, very large public high school, but at that point I think that was the beginning of my identity being formed and shaped and really having a better understanding of who I was as a person. So I was very thankful for that.

Q: Yah that's great. Um, oh, going into college what did you major in?

L: I majored in, I declared in business and that was part in parcel. Um, this is the running joke in my family where my parents really wanted me to be a doctor. Go figure right. And if I couldn't, engineering would be great. And of course my mom's like, "Well Leslie, I've known you for all your life and you can't get up early. So you're going to fail as a doctor. You can't do math, so you're going to fail engineering. I have no idea what you're going to do, but can you please go into something that's going to be somewhat, you know, self-sustaining." So we thought business would be good. And they were in the business of, you know, they had their own business and so naturally I think they felt, "Okay, well Leslie you can do business." [Laughs] "This is acceptable." So I declared business and I had applied to a number of different schools. And my strategy in applying to different schools was, I was applying to states or towns where I had relatives. [Both laugh] So this was my great strategy in high school. This is how I was thinking right, that if I'm going to go out of state that I would at least have some family somewhere. And so of course I was applying to Texas and Colorado, and California, and that's where I have family, all the while feeling really resentful towards my parents because all of my other friends were going to the University of Hawaii. My parents were one of the few that were like, "Oh oh, you're not staying. You have to get off this island," right! So I'm like wow, I am the most unloved child. But I think that, again, in hindsight it was probably one of the biggest gifts that my parents gave me, because I think they knew that I had to really learn more. Learn more about the world, learn more about myself, learn and grow within my capabilities. And so that was a big piece that I knew they wanted me to not just know Hawaii, but to be out there and know what the United States is about. And so, so my parents were pretty forward thinking. It's just at that, those particular moments while you can understand theoretically what they're trying to say, like wow, why am I still the only one being sent off? [Both laugh] And it was really hard that first semester transitioning from home to college, because they didn't go with me to orientation. They didn't move me in. They basically sent me on the airplane with two luggage and (--)

Q: Bye!

L: Yah, exactly, exactly. And thank goodness. So I had gotten into a few colleges, but I wound up choosing University of Colorado Boulder because my, well my favorite aunt also worked there. And so it was a connection for me that I felt, okay, well I really, I really love her. I know here the best out of all my extended family. I don't know Colorado. I have a John Denver record, which I really love. Um, never seen the snow so I thought it was a really you know, big adventure. And so she was super helpful, but again, much of my family didn't go to school in the United States, and so they really had no way of really helping me to understand some of these processes around orientation, what to expect. And orientation is completely different from what it looks like today, okay. There is no computers. There were just long lines. And how we registered was, and we had still those dial phones at that time, right. And so you had to dial in and then punch in these codes for each course, and then wait for them to tell you if it was filled. It's not, and it's not a, I don't think it was a live person, but it took hours to register. It was not...right? And so you would have to sit there, and you would have a long list of classes, because if one was filled you had to go to your next one and then recalculate your schedule based on time, right.

Q: Umhm.

L: So that's how cumbersome it was. So, so that was, so that was a piece. I went into college thinking that I was going to be a business major, and by that first year I thought I was going to kill myself, because it was just not an area that I felt connected with. Really had some negative experiences that first year in the course work, and began that you know, self-questioning about "Is this really what I want to do?" Love business, but did I really want to study it? And so I kind of bounced around a bit. Again, doing that piece around, okay, what's a major that would be acceptable to my parents? What can I do? I know I'm not going to be an art major. I know I'm not going to be a teacher. [Laughs] And so I thought, okay, well international relations might be a good area. And I'm thinking it's a little bit of a bridge between you know, the business world, but there's also that global aspect. And then I spent a little time in that and I was like, well I'm never going to get through these three years of foreign language. Unfortunately I should have paid attention a little bit more growing up. [Laughs]

And so I think just by happenstance I was, you know, I was taking a lot of different sociology courses. I really enjoyed psychology. It was also a time when I was taking a lot of Asian American Studies courses. It was not housed as Ethnic Studies at that time. However we had a number of faculty that were teaching Asian American, Chicano, African American and Native American Studies. And so I had taken a few of the Asian American and Latino Studies and really had affinity towards that. That out of anything I think was, those classes really, really again helped shaped who I was at that time and who I am now, but because it was not formalized as a major, again Ethnic Studies wasn't, didn't come about until a few years later, I really had to find a landing spot. And so wound up in Political Science, and I loved the course work, although I think at that time there wasn't, there wasn't enough course work around again, politics and

race. I think was your very, you know, traditional political science curriculum, but I felt like I was able to also explore and supplement through my ethnic studies at that time, course work.

And so fast forward a little bit later our campus was embroiled in a pretty big situation where faculty felt fairly discriminated. There was a situation around a tenure denial. And even though this person had numerous scholarly research, was ranked really high, there were some issues. And they had (--) Some of the faculty and the community had identified some racist practices within the chair and the senior leadership. And so as that was bubbling up there was also a number of different student issues. And so that year really started the precursor for many of us who came together and formed a coalition to challenge institutional racism. And so a lot of progressive action and finally there was a hunger strike, you know, to really have the university begin to examine why it was adequate for a faculty of color to teach courses, but not be able to come together as an Ethnic Studies Department. They had gone up numerous times and were denied departmental status. And so there was an investigation around that, around the negative behaviors within that Sociology Department. That's where the faculty, three faculty came out of, that were concerned about those racist allegations.

And so, and the student piece was really such a pinnacle piece, because again it was really asking the campus to take an inward look at what's going on around the experiences for students? What's happening in the classroom? And it was an interesting, it was a really interesting time where a number of folks came together and at the end of that semester I believe the Chancellor at that time pledge to begin the conversations about Ethnic Studies, and Ethnic Studies was formalized the next year. And so it's still going well. But I remember those are, you know, some of those really important and critical times, because I don't believe that the institution that I was at, I don't believe that they would have moved there had it not been for people and community asking some very, very critical questions and saying, you know, that there's value and there's benefit for the experiences of students to have a broader perspective that encompasses race. That puts race, class and gender at the forefront, and to also in doing so, value the faculty that were teaching these classes, so.

Q: Yah. Let's see. Oh, you mentioned earlier that you did have a sibling. (L: Umhm) What were your parents' expectations for your sibling verses for you?

L: That's a good question? So I have a younger brother who is four and a half years younger than myself. And I think if we were both girls it might not have been so stark. But my brother, and it was hard for me to figure out if some of that, or most of that was rooted in some of the traditional Asian gender binaries, or if my, if it was more of a reaction. My brother was a fairly sickly child. And we had bounced around in hospitals quite a bit. There was a certain point of his time I think when he was about I don't know, from about maybe four to eight, that he just every year got really, really sick and no one could figure it out. The doctors couldn't figure it out, but to the point that he had to be hospitalized. And again, there was no diagnosis. Not like he had a disease. And he grew out of it. But I remember that he was able to, even as a teenager I was the one that was tracked basically. Like where are you? You're late. You gotta be home! And then he was you know, like see you later. I'm going to basketball. I'm going to

this. I'm going to ceramics class. I'm like, hey, how come he has all this ability? And a lot of times it was, you know, well he's a boy, he can do it. You know, he (--) We got to watch over you Leslie, because you're a girl. It's not as safe out there, which I get. There's some practicality around that, but I've always wondered. I'm just like, wow, is it because I'm responsible and I'm older, they need me at the store? Is it because he's kind of, he has no interest at the store. So I always perceived my brother as having a lot more freedom than I did. And so I don't think it was a huge resentment. I just grew up knowing, oh well, okay, it's not fair, but this is kind of how it is. And then again, as I grew up, you know, I've also appreciated the time with my parents, because I um, really, even when I go back now to visit it's not that they would shut the store down and hang out and take a vacation. My connection points with my parents would really be around the store and they can't take off. And so you know, I'm forty what, forty-three now. I still go back home and as soon as I get there, you know, I'm ringing up the cash register. I'm talking to them in between customers, right. So that's something that I've always, that hasn't changed in all of the years that I've been away. So yah, he, I've always thought that he was the luckier one, but you know, again, I think as you get older it's more of well, you know, I've had some good times with my parents. I've had some really great opportunities working with them and learning from them.

And now as a parent it's so funny, because you do reflect back on so much of what they've said or talked to you. And part of their grocery store also an herbal store. And so I still go back, oh, what does my parents say about curing this, or for, you know, for this ailment, or you know for coughs what did they use? So it's some of those things that I feel so blessed that I had some time with, verses, you know, my brother had a lot more of these other external pieces, but he had never really loved the store. He, he could care less about some of that stuff. And I think he is also finding his way back in a different capacity to connect with my parents as we're older now. And so it's a different type of feeling. So I'm glad I never got super, super super upset over it. I think I noticed it. I don't know if it kind of spurred my sense of social justice early on. [Both Laugh] Because I think I was always that person. And even in high school I had become like the high school ombudsman. Whatever, you know, at that point at the high school is like what is ombudsman? You know, I always felt that sense of I need to help people who feel wronged, or not, or if things are unfair how can I step into that? And that also carried over into college. And even though I didn't have those terminology at that point, I think I was still really motivated and that's why I got involved in a lot of different initiatives, and projects, and movements that were around justice oriented. And it could be on environment. It could be on you know, animals. It could be with people, communities, but that was the forefront I think, the thread that carried through a lot of the work that I did.

So I don't know, maybe I'm [being to mean] to my brother, but I saw it, I saw those gender dynamics and I also know, and I watched my family, my extended family growing up. And so it was all kind of catalogued in my brain, like, hm this is interesting. Because I had a really strong mother who also said, "Don't take anything. Be independent. Hold your own finances. Get your education so you can do this." And so I was watching all these dynamics being played out, yet I also had a very, very formative parent figure who said, "You can be what you want to be," or "You can be this independent person." So I'm like, well now, now you got me all screwed up.

[Both laugh] But I'm so glad. No, I'm just joking about, but I'm so glad that I had such a strong parent because I think it enables me now to be able to really again assess, "What do I want to be? Who do I want to become? How do I need to get there?" And again it has to be, you know, I have to do it for the right reasons, for me right, and for my family, and not because for any fame, glory, money. That doesn't matter to me, but why am I doing it? Is it the right thing to do, right?

Q: Um, was there ever at time while growing up that you wish that you wanted to fit in with everyone else?

L: Sure! (Q: Yah?) Sure. I was picked on a lot. Like I said, I was a pretty awkward, quiet, shy kid. And I think, funny enough parochial school was pretty mean. [Laughs] And it was one of those interesting moments where you know, students knew I could perform academically. So I was one of the ones that typically got straight A's. And so folks knew that I had some strengths in certain areas. And so they would lay off of me on that. But sports I think I was always last to be picked. You know, I don't think we had a lot of plays or, oh, we had hoola. Oh my gosh that was painful for me, because I'm so like not about limelight or anything, and I was shorter so they would always put me in the front. So there was those things that you know, I survived that experience and I wasn't one of the popular kids. I was always awkward. Like I said, my parents didn't go to PTA or any of that stuff. And so, so you know, kids being kids would always you know, pick on the ones that are on the fringe. And so there is always moments that I felt like, ha, I wonder what it would be like if was popular. Nah, you know what? I still love my books. I don't want to go to these parties. [Both laugh] And I don't know if that's just that rebellious streak in me, that I'm like, yah, you know what, if you don't like me, well you know, tough for you kind of a thing right. And so I was always kind of that interesting kid where I'm like, yah, prom, bah. I'm saving money by not going. [Laughs] So I had, I don't know, maybe it was an internal, a really good internal sense of resiliency, but for me, my sight was just focused on getting to high school, getting to college, all of this didn't matter. But of course there were moments that were like, wow, it could have been, I could have had a better day without being bullied, or you know, having names called at me. But I grew up also having a little bit of thicker (--) I had to develop thicker skin because it was either that, or just be crying every day. And so I saw that middle school time as transitionary. That when I got to high school I would probably never see these kids again, (Q: Yah) which was true. [Laugh] And the experience in high school was a lot different. And so yah.

Q: Microaggressions are brief everyday exchanges that send degrading messages to historically marginalize or [unclear] based solely on their membership in that group. Have you faced any microaggressions in college, or in the work place? And if you did, how did you face them?

L: Yup, umhm. That's a great question. I'm just even thinking back to, they're not microaggressions, they were outright forms of racism and sexism. Colorado, so in college when I went to Colorado it was a lot less diverse than it is now, and I had just moved from Colorado about, this is, this will be my second year. So in 2014 I left Colorado. And when I went to school there in the 90s it was very different. And so people would drive down the street and

say, "Go back to where you came from." Um, oh I would get this all the time where folks would, I would be in target in line and I had women tell me, "This is the line that you're in!" You know, like thinking that I just didn't either speak English or I was deaf, right. And so I would get that quite a bit. Again, I was still quiet my freshmen year. I didn't make a big, you know. So I think a lot of folks thought I was international and didn't understand English, but I had a lot of folks really either one, make assumptions especially in the dorms when they find out that I was from Hawaii. I got all the questions about, "You must love pineapples?" "You have shoes?" "You have TV?" It's like whoah, what do you think? Yah, so I got all of that in the dorms. But what was more shocking was just being around in the neighborhood in Colorado and having folks not again, understand those dynamics. So some of those were very overt, some of them yah, played out in microaggressions. Like I said, thinking you know, or having folks make the assumption that I was not able to speak English, or not comprehending, you know, the daily nuances of American culture.

Here I think as beyond college I would say, you know, those happen in a lot of different other forms. I think you know, I see it in terms of you know, my gender, sometimes in meetings where you know, I will say one thing, it could be in gender, it could be my ethnicity, but I will say one thing and I will have a white male paraphrase exactly and everyone will listen to him.

Q: Umhm.

L: Um, I think there's pieces around age that I see quite a bit, where folks will automatically dismiss based on where they think you fit in that age category. And then you combine it with ethnicity, my heritage of Asia, there's a lot of assumptions around who I am, how I should behave, and that comes out. But I see that less here in the New England area. It's in different forms I guess. Colorado I guess there's still, you know, there's pockets right. I mean I think Denver, which is much more diverse you'll have a different dynamic. Um, but I was thinking, I was having a conversation with a colleague in Colorado and it was noticed because this was a person who was very uncomfortable going through this neighborhood. And she was recounting her story about how she had gone through this neighborhood looking for this restaurant somebody had told her about to get their tea or something. Took a wrong turn with her other colleague and they immediately felt super highly anxious, started locking their doors, rolling up their windows and commenting about the neighborhood because it was more impoverished. And so my colleague and I are listening to this and we're like wow, where is this? And we're thinking, well maybe they drove in just in a really unsafe part. And so we, so I asked? I says, "What neighborhood did you drive through?" And they're like, "Oh," this and this and this and this. I'm like, "Oh," like I drive there all the time, because my partner at that time had lived in that neighborhood and so I was always down there. I was like, "Oh, that's so interesting with perceptions." And it wasn't my microaggression, or it wasn't my experience, but just thinking about how a person who is unfamiliar with a neighborhood, or unfamiliar with the community would feel like, okay it's unsafe, it's impoverished, so you know, they're going to rob me. That was the underlining message that was being conveyed. And my, similarly my other colleague who grew up in that neighborhood, we both looked at each other like, oh, because that's our stomping ground. [Laughs] And it was so funny. But it was, it was in those moments that you

know, become so crystal clear that again, if we're complacent, or we are so comfortable in our own privileges, and I attribute her piece around class, around ethnicity, that we don't realize what we might be potentially conveying, or doing right, in both messaging or in action form to another group and how those privileges play out. And similarly, you know, I have to remind myself, yah, even though I am subordinating in some of my identities being a female, being a woman of color, I also have privileges that I also bring to the table in that there are a lot of moments probably that I'm very comfortable. I don't think twice, right, and so how, how do I, as a recipient of some of those, again, targeted and subordinated pieces that I don't reflect it back, or I don't similarly oppress another group. And that's more of an important piece for me. But have I seen microaggressions? Yes, working towards, you know, educating more folks around it, because I think it can be so multi-layered, and I do think that folks um, generally are good intent and good natured, but we have a societal issue that we have this structure and system that tells us otherwise, that race matters and differences matter in ways that are not productive, right.

Q: So how, yah, how did you become the Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs? So how did you get your (--)

L: You want the long version of the short version? [Both Laughs]

Q: Whichever one.

L: Oh boy! Um, short version, I applied. Longer version I guess in a nutshell, I really (--) So I was in a similar office at the University of Colorado, and we had about eleven staff, and I (--) At the time that I left I would have been making my, well I was in my nineteenth year there as a professional staff. And as a young professional I was hired into a budget position right out of college. And again, I had that unconventional track of thinking, oh, you know, I'm just going to go back home. I don't know what I'm doing with my life. I didn't go to career services, all of that great stuff. I wasn't applying to anything, right. Not your typical role model in that. And they had approached me for this position. And of course I was you know, honored and interested, because that was one of the few areas, the Multicultural Affairs Office and the Ethnic Studies Office where I was really, really comfortable. I was also working on a part-time position at the Environmental Health and Safety Office where I had also had a student position. So they wanted to keep me on. But this was my love right, diversity work, being able to impact students as much as I was impacted and had folks help me and support me through a really, again, formative time of my life.

And so I accepted the position, grew into it. A couple of years later there was a lateral position for a university counselor. I thought great. I could expand another skill set, be challenged in another area, and spent a number of years in that. And then also moved into a more senior leadership position later, and that's where a lot of things got super rocky at the university, because we had a number of different leadership transitions. And prior to that I wasn't thinking about you know, so much graduate school. I wasn't thinking of upward trajectory. I was just really enjoying the comradery that I had with this team who was doing such innovative

work, and doing it in a way that was so genuine, so authentic, and so caring. And it was such a great community model that I never thought in a moment that that team, or that dynamic [framework] would like kind of dissipate. I wasn't thinking about that. Again, I was super young right. And I was thinking, you know, this is great. I'm learning all the time. Why do I need (--) And again you have to understand that it was a time period where many of us, there wasn't that need or pressure to go on to graduate school right. It changed over very quickly. And so towards the later part of that experience, yah, I was realizing, oh my goodness, you know, having an advanced degree is absolutely necessary, and so I did go back later in life to get my Masters.

And at that time again, the university was going through a very, very tumultuous time. Loved the worked that I was still doing with my students, but found that my role was becoming more and more administrative and not so much in a positive administrative sense where I'm creating new policies, or creating new things. It was really um, to be brutally honest it was a lot of cleanup and getting folks out of messes. And I was also in a place where I was doing a lot of conflict mediation between my staff and other people. And while that was valuable I was taking a hard assessment in terms of okay, what do I want to do with my life? And I'm again fortunate that I am able to serve in the roles that I was serving in. But going back to again, where is my passion? Where is my love, is working with students and empowering students. And I was being taken away more and more from that and not being able to do the best that I could with my student cohort and population at that time.

And so it was also simultaneously my partner, we had gotten through a good ten years plus of helping his mom through cancer, and she finally passed. And so it was right around that time that after she had passed, I mean it was a pretty painful piece for my partner. And so we had talked about what would it look like to now begin to envision being out of state? Again, we had never talked about so much leaving Colorado. I think we were happy in the environment, but I thought, you know, it might be a good change of pace to again, challenge ourselves, because we haven't been to New England, we don't know as much. We have, you know, family and friends all in the West Coast and Midwest region, but it also came into context with our kids because we were again, highly invested in making sure that they were going to have a strong educational background.

And so we started exploring what would it look like. And so Massachusetts was my, top of my list of course. I had some really close friends here, and you know Massachusetts is also known for a strong education system. And so did some you know, preliminary kind of feeling out applying. And then I saw the position at UMass Lowell come up and I thought, wow, okay. I've done so many years in my capacity at Boulder. I learned a lot. I really did some in-depth understanding, bridging, relationship building. What would it look like to take it that next level?

And again, I never had that trajectory. I'm going to be a director, I'm going to be this, but I felt like so many people were saying, you know what Leslie? It's time. You have so much experience and so much narratives and so much to say about diversity worth, that you need to be at this next level and you need to also be able to be in a role where you can help nurture and

groom and help others who are coming up the pipeline. And so I said, “Yes, I hear you on that, and I do feel like that is the next piece.” So I took that leap and I’m grateful for it. I am so appreciative of my experiences here. I know it’s still new but students are wonderful. And I’ve had an amazing, amazing time creating again, new relationships with the faculty and staff here, and continuing that work. And I tell my students, because you know, it was so funny because I had to tell them in a semester that you know (--) So I had known a little while that I was coming to UMass Lowell. And I had held off on telling them, because they had such a rough semester. There was a lot of racist incidences that were going on in the dorm rooms. And so I remember coming into the room and I finally had, I had to tell them because it was April and I was leaving in about a month. And so I remember having my students there and I said, “You know what? I have this opportunity. It’s not that I want to leave, but I also need to.” And I remember they all looked at me in dead silence. This was not a silent group. And so they all looked at me and finally one of them said, “This is an April Fool’s joke, isn’t it?” It was not April Fools. It was a few days after right. I’m like, “No!” [Both laugh] But I remember that so distinctly, but, and the piece around that is that we still, we’re still in communication. And I told them that you know, even though I’m not there it doesn’t mean that the work that we as individuals stop, right. You’re going to not stay in Colorado forever. You might go to grad school. You might take another job in a different part of the country, but the work, how do you carry that forward? How do you pay it forward right, and know that you have resources and mentors across the nation. And that, you know, keep that in mind. That you might not be able to see me every day, but you sure can call, and you sure can you know, and I’ll still write you those letters of recommendations, and I still will coach, and I still will be there both in terms of your personal life and your professional. And I think that’s been the gift that you know, um, you know hopefully they keep in mind. And I’m still talking to a few of them. And one of them is coming, um, graduating this semester and then just got a position at, or not a position, but going to grad school at Boston University. So I’m excited for that, and I’m excited for you know, the students who go on, you know, and take that next step. And go into their careers, but always with the mindset of how can I help more and do more especially around these important topics of identity and race, class and gender. And how do I transform the next place that I’m going to be?

Q: So what advice do you have for young women who may face microaggressions like maybe in their professional life, or just growing up in general?

L: Yup. Yup. I would say find your support system, because there are those moments that are very, very unkind. And you know, I don’t know if it’s situations in the workplace, it could be on the street, I think when you are in a contained environment such as a work environment, or in a classroom, I mean those, there are factors that then become magnified right. It’s not so much that you can say, “I will never see that person on the street again. They said something stupid. Who knows?” But if you are in a contained environment there’s a lot of, there’s a lot of other considerations. Don’t be isolated. You know, talk to someone. Find your support system. It could be an RA, it could be a TA, it could be, it could be a family. It could be someone that you feel that you can just share that information, because I think microaggressions become macro level issues, because it’s not just one right. It can add up. It may not be from the same person,

but it's the cumulative effect of being disrespected, devalued, marginalized, rendered invisible that add up. And that's, so much of it we take on ourselves and it's hard to ask for help, but it's important to do so and to find out who can help.

You know, I get stories all the time where either students or staff might be saying, "You know what? I just feel crazy. I feel like I'm out of my mind, or I feel like I'm super sensitive and people are telling me stop over reacting." Well you know what? You are reacting to something that's very, very detrimental. And you need to be able to have an opportunity and a space, a safe space, to process that. It's not something that you get a paper cut right, and say, "Oh, I need to just band aide." It's deeper than that. It stays within your psyche. It reminds you the next time something happens and it gets triggered. And so I don't, yah, I would just say find your support system, whoever that might be.

Secondly I think as young women are going through their college education they're getting their degree, they're getting their life experience and work experience, find mentors. That's always been a big thing for me. On advices, find people who can support you on that professional level and the personal level, but who can also give you that realistic landscape. So as you're faced with this you know, what are the political nuances? What do you need to do? How do you need to react? How can you take a step back sometimes to collect, because, to collect your emotions and your thoughts and then present in a certain way? Because I think without having some of the coaching um, we don't know what that landscape will look like and what, how we react is oftentimes judged in a lot of ways, right. And so as much as I would love to say for folks to you know, yes, say what's on your mind. Think about it, run it through some folks, because just because I have seen situations that don't necessarily go well.

Q: Okay. That was my last question, so.

L: Was that your last question?

Q: Yeah, thank you very much.

L: Yah!

Interview ends

Jw